



Understanding and Supporting Anxiety in the Classroom

People also ask :

Is anxiety getting worse in the world?



Why is anxiety increasing?



Why is anxiety so popular now?



What percentage of the world has anxiety?



Will anxiety ever end?



Has social anxiety increased since COVID?



Do people with anxiety live longer?



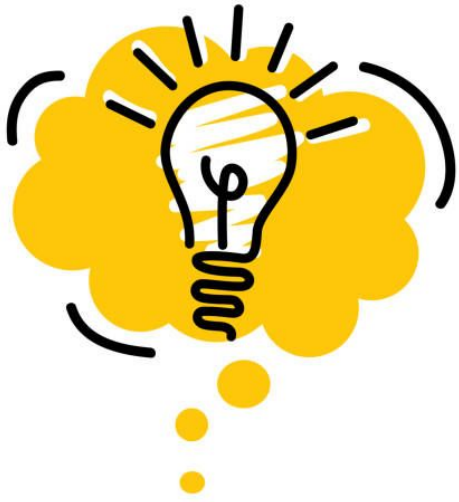
Is anxiety a disability?



How to remove anxiety permanently?



[Feedback](#)

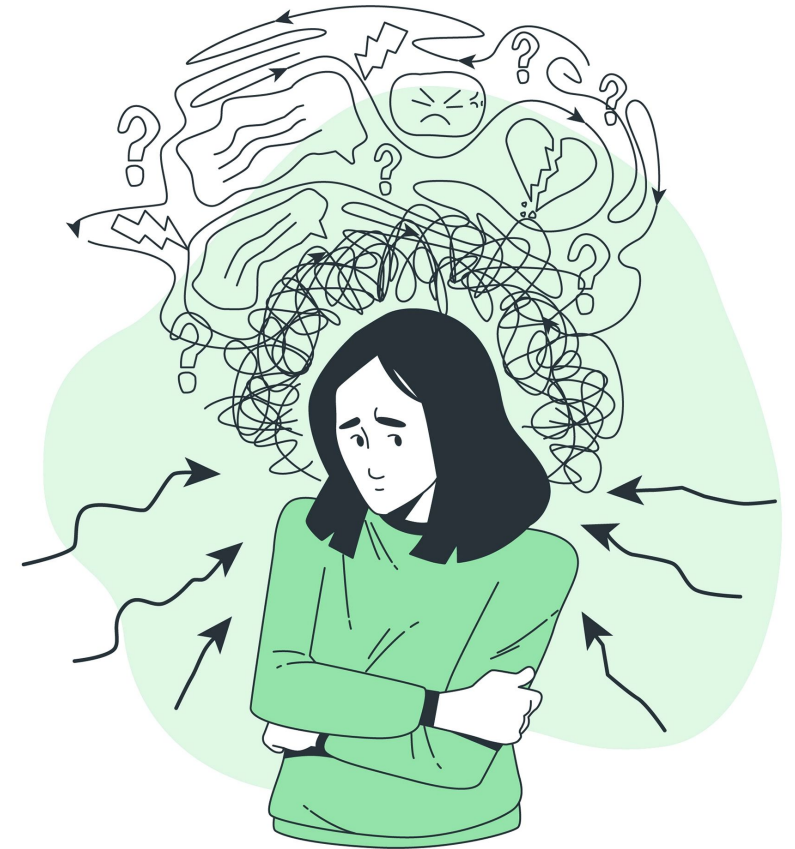


**What is
contributing to
the increasing
rates of anxiety
in the world?**



What is Anxiety?

- A normal response to stress or perceived danger
- Becomes problematic when it interferes with daily functioning
- Anxiety can take different forms, each with unique presentations

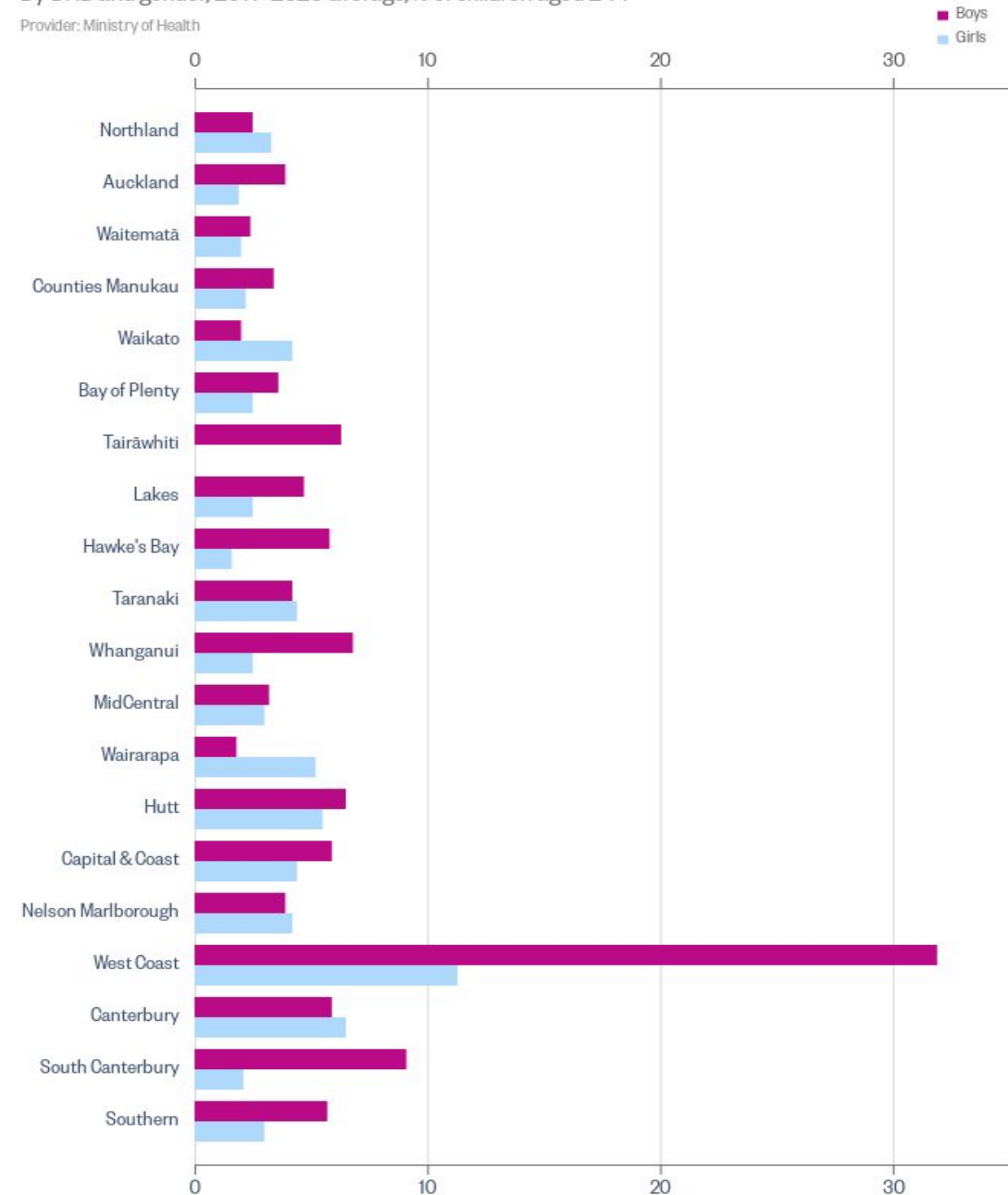


Prevalence in NZ Children

New Zealand children diagnosed with anxiety disorder

By DHB and gender, 2017-2020 average, % of children aged 2-14

Provider: Ministry of Health



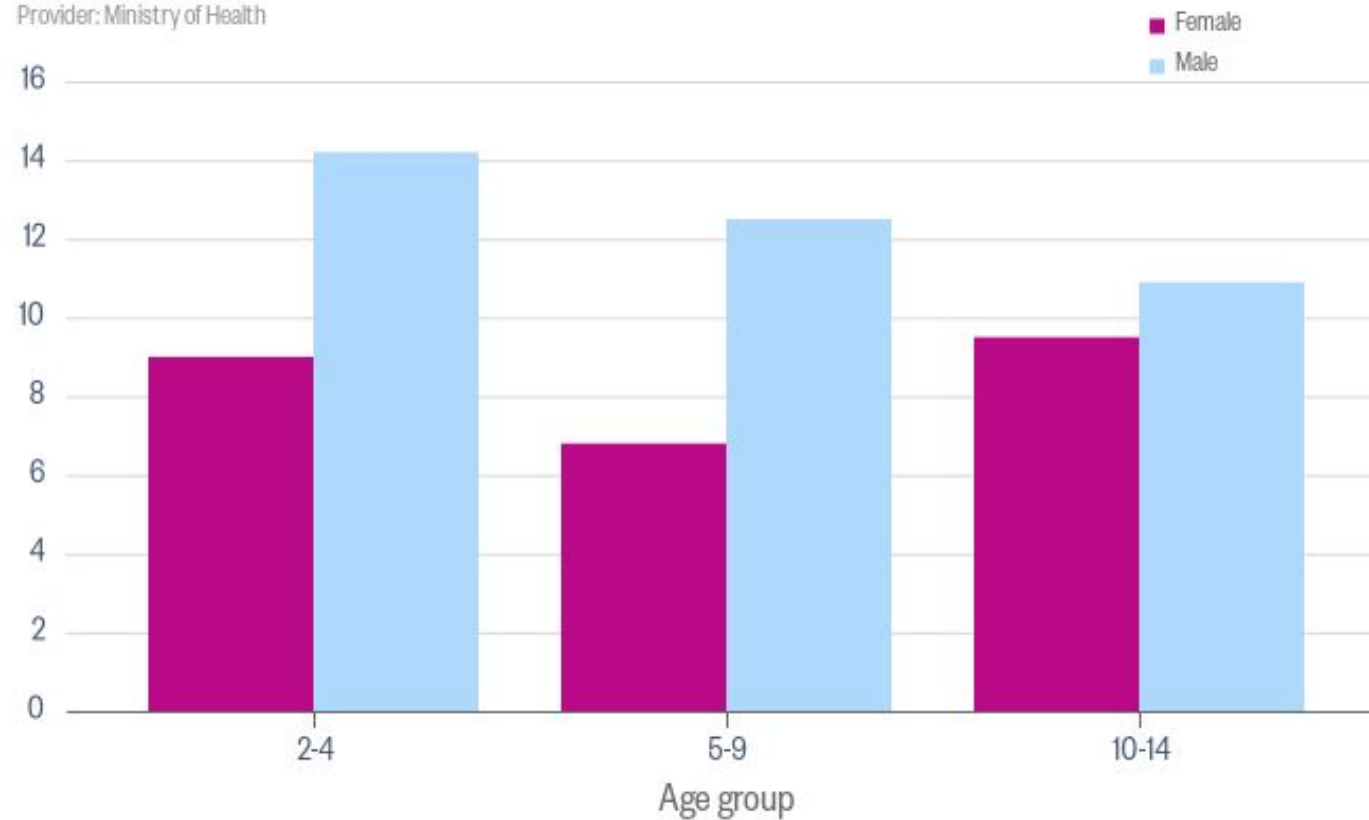
Prevalence in NZ Children

New Zealand children who are likely to have emotional and/or behavioural problems

By age group and gender, years ended June 2022-2023, % of children within group

Provider: Ministry of Health

figure.nz

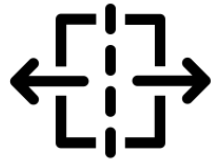


Generalised Anxiety Disorder

- Excessive worry about a range of everyday issues
- Often accompanied by perfectionism and reassurance-seeking
- Presenting signs may include:
 - Constant “what if” questions
 - Difficulty starting or finishing tasks
 - Overthinking or procrastination
 - Complaining of stomach aches or headaches
 - Physical symptoms - breathing, heart rate
 - Avoiding activities (including ones they previously enjoyed)

Support Strategies:

- Break tasks into manageable steps
- Use worry time or worry boxes
- Teach calming techniques and positive self-talk
- Offer choices
- Teach self-regulation skills
- Create a calm corner
- Incorporate movement breaks
- Pre-warn about changes
- Use positive reinforcement particularly for attempts rather than results



Separation Anxiety

- Fear of being away from parents or caregivers
- Common in younger children, especially during transitions
- Presenting signs may include:
 - Extremely upset or clingy at drop-off
 - Frequent visits to the office or sick bay
 - Difficulty settling into the day
 - Fearing that something terrible will happen to the parent or child while they are apart

Support Strategies:

- Consistent drop-off routines with high preference activities
- Transitional objects (e.g., photo, lunch box notes)
- Gradual transitions
- Social stories
- Special jobs or roles
- Home-school communication and consistent messaging



Social Anxiety

- Intense fear of being judged or embarrassed in social situations
- Often mistaken for shyness
- Presenting signs may include:
 - Avoidance of group work or speaking in class
 - Physical symptoms before social events
 - Overly self-critical or perfectionist

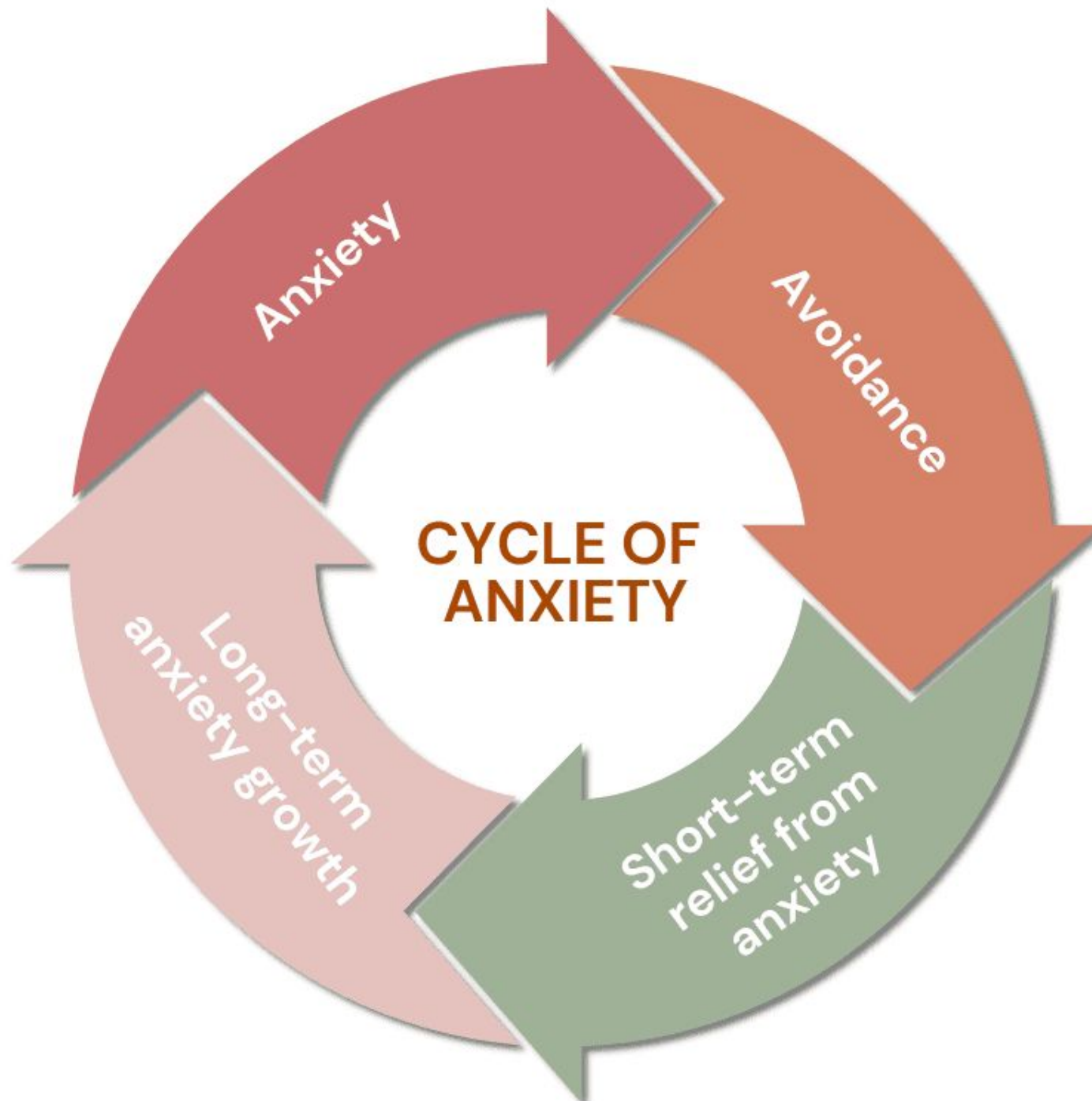
Support Strategies:

- Encourage participation in low-pressure ways
- Use buddy systems or small group activities
- Praise effort, not just outcomes
- Focus on growth mindset
- Model kindness and acceptance
- Use co-operative learning tasks



Selective Mutism

- Consistent failure to speak in specific social settings (e.g., school) despite speaking in others (e.g., home)
- Has persisted for at least a month or 3 months in a new environment
- Cannot be better explained by a communication disorder or lack of fluency in the language
- English Language Learners
- Presenting signs may include:
 - Child speaks freely at home but is silent at school
 - May use gestures or whisper to communicate
- Support Strategies:
 - Avoid anything that increases the child's discomfort (e.g. pressure or gentle encouragement to talk before the child is ready; asking questions - making the child feel very uncomfortable while you wait for them to answer; negative comments)
 - Anything that teaches the child avoidance (e.g., all the above; answering for the child; support to avoid social situations; encouraging whispering)
 - Support child to do whatever they can manage, one tiny step at a time, at their own pace. The first step is participation in the social situation with no expectation to talk





Children with Selective Mutism

1. Anxiety

- The child feels intense fear or worry about speaking in front of others.
- Thoughts like: *“What if I say something wrong?”* or *“Everyone will laugh at me.”*
- Physical symptoms may include racing heart, stomach aches, or freezing up.

2. Avoidance

- The child avoids speaking altogether in the classroom.
- May use gestures, nodding, or whispering to a peer instead of talking.
- Avoidance feels like the safest option to reduce distress.

3. Short-Term Relief

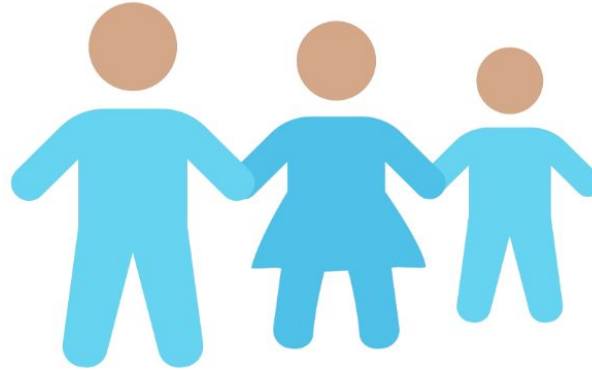
- Not speaking provides immediate relief from anxiety.
- The child feels safer and less exposed.
- Reinforces the belief: *“If I don’t speak, I won’t feel anxious.”*

4. Long-Term Anxiety Growth

- Avoidance prevents the child from learning that speaking can be safe.
- Anxiety becomes more entrenched and harder to overcome.
- Social and academic development may be impacted over time.

Contributing factors

- Genetics and temperament
- Family stress or trauma
- Learning difficulties or neurodiversity
- School transitions or academic pressure
- Learned behaviour



Impact on Learning and Social Development

- Reduced engagement and participation
- Difficulty with peer relationships
- Lower academic performance
- Increased risk of school refusal



Long-Term Risks Associated with SM



- Children do not simply “grow out” of selective mutism.
- Without identification and appropriate support there is a risk of SM becoming more entrenched and resistant to intervention.
- School work is likely to suffer as the child is unable to seek clarification, ask for help, share ideas or use others as a sounding board.
- If the SM is ignored or inappropriately handled, there is a risk of the child developing secondary anxieties, e.g.:
 - school refusal,
 - Social Anxiety Disorder,
 - low self-esteem,
 - other psychological difficulties.

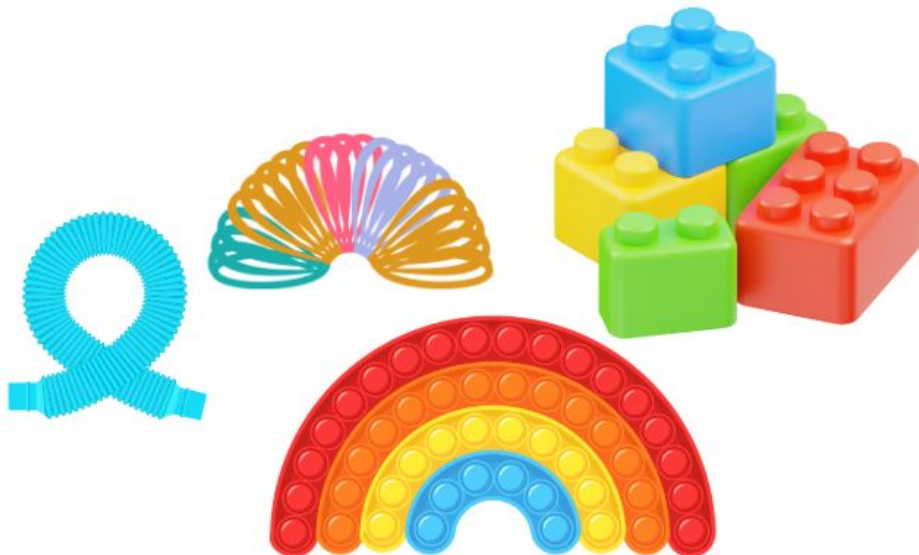
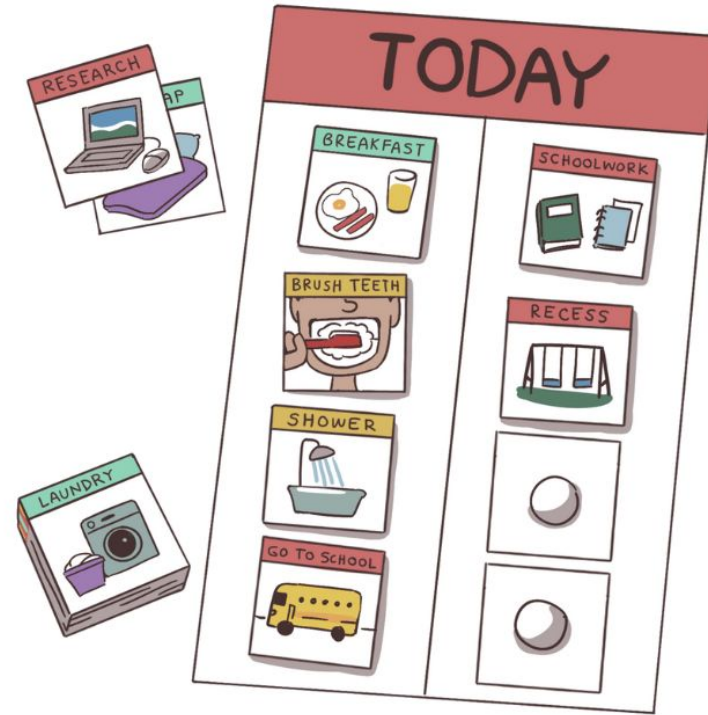
Principles for Supporting Anxious Children

- Build strong, trusting relationships
 - Acknowledge their feelings
- Create predictable routines and clear expectations
- Use calm, reassuring communication
 - Encourage them to think of ways to solve their problem rather than saying “don’t worry”
- Avoid punitive responses to anxiety driven behaviours



Classroom Strategies

- Visual schedules
- Transition warnings
- Provide quiet spaces or calming corners
- Allow movement breaks or sensory tools
- Offer choices
- Use positive reinforcement and praise effort
- Clear communication



BRIEF EXERCISES FOR ANXIOUS CHILDREN



BELLY BREATHING

Get your child to place one hand on their chest and the other on their belly. Ask them to breathe in through their nose for half their age in seconds, hold for half their age in seconds, and breathe out for their full age in seconds.

If they are 8 or older, breathe in for 4 seconds, hold for 5 seconds, then breathe out for 4 seconds (adjust this as per your child's needs).

BUBBLE BREATHING

Fill a cup halfway with water or milk and place a straw in it. Ask your child to take a deep belly breath and hold for 3 seconds, then blow into the straw slowly through their mouth.

Repeat this 5-10 times (or as many as your child needs to feel less anxious).

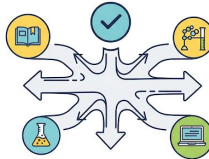


ROBOTS, JELLYFISH AND TOWERS

This exercise will help your child's muscles relax. You say 'robots', 'jellyfish' or 'towers' & your child mimics the behaviour of each one - robots which are stiff, jellyfish which are floppy & relaxed, & towers, which are strong & stretch up high.

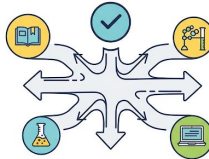
Let your child go through the actions of each a couple of times, then mix the order of the names, but make sure there's always a jellyfish movement after each robot or tower.

Evidence-Based Classroom Strategies



- Visual Supports
- Movement and Sensory Breaks
- Choice-Based Learning
- Praise and Positive Reinforcement
- Teaching Emotional Literacy

Classroom supports for students with anxiety



- Visual Supports
- Movement and Sensory Breaks
- Choice-Based Learning
- Praise and Positive Reinforcement
- Teaching Emotional Literacy

Teaching Emotional Literacy

- Can your students identify what being anxious feels like?
- Where does anxiousness fit in the Zones of Regulation?
- How do you model and teach coping strategies? What strategies do you use?



To be used with The Zones of Regulation™ curriculum
Reproducible E

The ZONES of Regulation™

 	 	 	 
 	 	 	 
BLUE ZONE Sad Sick Tired Bored Moving Slowly	GREEN ZONE Happy Calm Feeling Okay Focused Relaxed	YELLOW ZONE Frustrated Worried Silly/Wiggly Excited Loss of Some Control	RED ZONE Mad/Angry Terrified Elated/Ecstatic Devastated Out of Control

© 2011 Think Social Publishing, Inc. All rights reserved.
From The Zones of Regulation™ by Leah M. Kuypers • Available at www.socialthinking.com

Behaviours that can be driven by anxiety

- Overreacting to minor setbacks
- Meltdowns over small errors
- Asking repetitive questions
- Insistence on routines or sameness
- Frequent or long visits to the bathroom or sick bay
- Arguing or refusing to follow instructions, especially in unfamiliar or high-pressure situations
- Task avoidance behaviours
- Withdrawing socially
- Outbursts or tantrums especially when faced with transitions or unexpected changes
- Talking excessively or interrupting

Setting Consequences

Why

- Boundaries and consequences are essential
- Structure reduces anxiety
- Learning social and emotional skills
- Protect the learning environment
- Know your learner

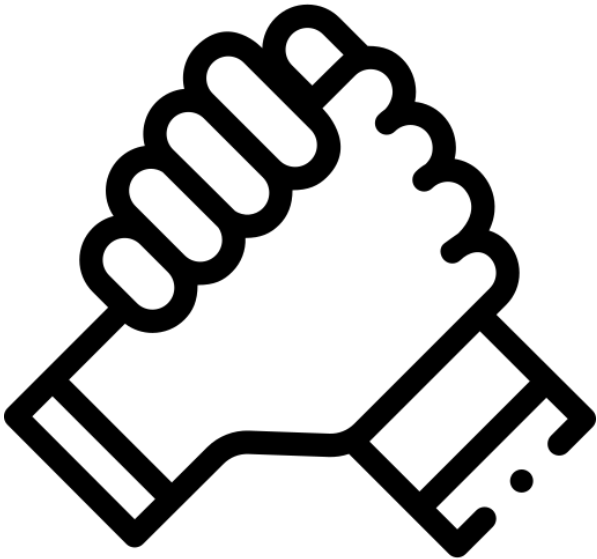
How

- Stay calm
- Validate first, then redirect
- Use predictable and proactive consequences
- Offer choices within limits
- Follow through consistently
- Debrief after an incident

When to seek further support

Tamariki may need some extra support when:

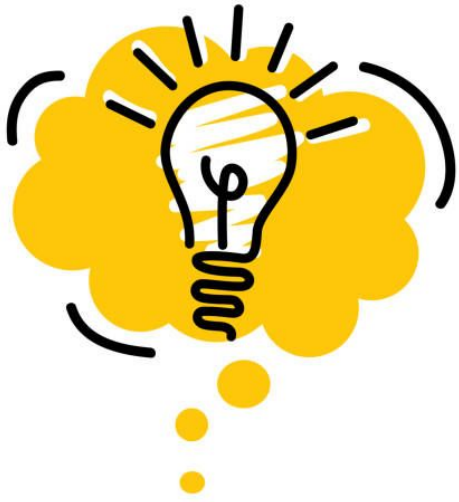
- They feel anxious more than other children of a similar age
- Anxiety stops them from participating in activities at school or socially
- Anxiety interferes with their ability to do things that other children their age can do
- Their fears and worries seem out of proportion to the issues in their life



Resources for teachers and parents

- Anxiety NZ Child & Youth Services Website
 - Free Mini Course
- Anxiety Canada Educator Resources
 - Downloadable PDF guides
 - Caretoons available on YouTube
- Inclusive Education TKI – Recognise and Manage Stress and Anxiety: Strategies to strengthen inclusive practice
- Tūturu Webinar – Anxiety and young people: Strategies for Schools





**What do you
proactively do to create
the culture that you
want for you students?**

**What will you do after
today?**



Te Tāhuhu o
te Mātauranga
Ministry of Education

temahau.govt.nz

education.govt.nz

We **shape** an **education** system that delivers
equitable and **excellent** outcomes

He mea **tārai** e mātou te **mātauranga**
kia **rangatira** ai, k'a **mana taurite** ai ōna **huanga**



Te Kāwanatanga
o Aotearoa
New Zealand Government